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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a process and format for making decisions concerning placement of students with emotional and behavior disorders. A sequential approach in the decision making process is urged, focusing on the student's progress to date, appropriate programs, and protection against a specialized setting becoming the permanent placement. The least restrictive environment (LRE) is proposed as the quality standard and is applied to issues of generalization, curriculum in specialized environments, and provision of specialized services. Data relevant to placement of these students in either regular or special schools are presented, organized into seven categories: (1) demographics; (2) special education history; (3) Individualized Education Program characteristics; (4) procedural components; (5) prior interventions; (6) LRE specific procedures; (7) behavioral characteristics; and (8) rationale for intensive service environments. (DB)

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Factors in Selecting Instructional Settings for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*

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The legal concept of least restrictive environment and the advocacy extension of this concept into practice under the rubric of inclusion are considered by many to be the major agenda in special education for the 1990s. The desire to educate students with disabilities with their so-called normal peers certainly seems to be a lofty, and what many consider to be an essential, goal. But how far do we apply this concept in the case of students with behavioral needs including those with serious emotional and behavioral disorders? How do we balance the rights of these students with their peers who some would contend may be in harms way by virtue of having these students in their classrooms? In advocating for emotionally and behaviorally disordered students, what are the essential programmatic elements they need in order to profit from inclusion in regular classrooms? What questions regarding appropriateness of programming must be weighed as we advocate for these students? This presentation will focus on such questions.

Decision Making Guidelines

While it is certainly important to keep in mind all of the legal standards related to the least restrictive environment and the specific considerations that may be important in looking at LRE in relation to emotional and behavioral disorders it still remains the responsibility of a staffing team, composed of parents and those educators most directly involved in working with a particular student, to make the decision regarding the location of where a student with special education needs should receive his or her education. As Champagne (1993) notes, educators have been asked to weigh LRE considerations against appropriate program issues. In contrast to this "balancing" approach he proposes that a sequential approach be used by decision makers. The steps include:

1) The question of what will be provided for the child comes before questions of where it will be provided.

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* Much of this content also appears in Smith, C.R. (1995). LRE and students with emotional and behavioral disorders: Issues for consideration. Proceedings of the 16th National Institute on Legal Issues in Educating Individuals with Disabilities. Horsham, P. A.: LRP Publications.

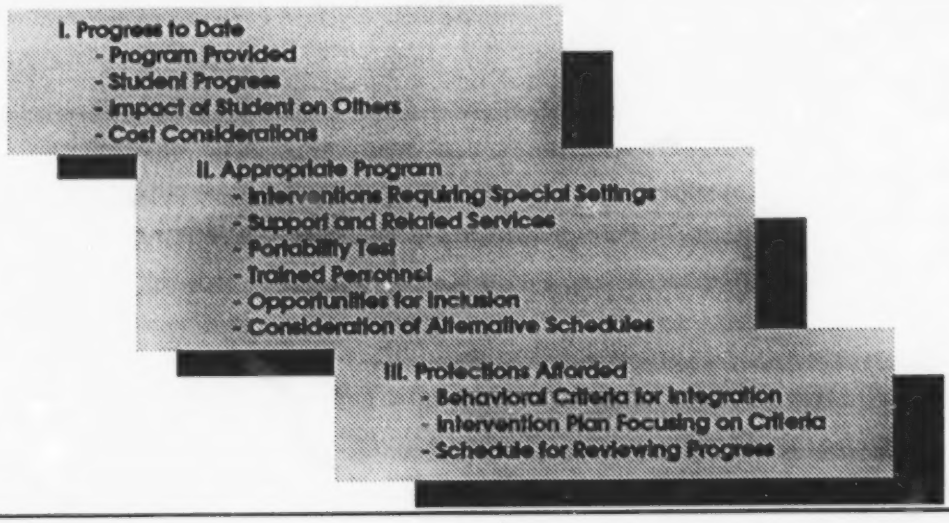
2) Each educational setting is examined not only "as is" but also as it might be modified.

3) Each placement is examined one at a time in a particular sequence (from least to most restrictive).

4) Even after the primary placement is tentatively determined, additional opportunities for part-time integration are considered.

Table I provides a listing of factors that this author believes would seem important for a staffing team to consider that supplement Champagne's suggestions. These factors are based on a review of selected policy statements from the U.S. Department of Education, court decisions, and professional literature. This presentation will provide a more detailed discussion of each of these elements. Definitions of the broad categories of questions are:

Table 1


I. Progress to Date
- Program Provided
- Student Progress
- Impact of Student on Others
- Cost Considerations
II. Appropriate Program
- Interventions Requiring Special Settings
- Support and Related Services
- Portability Test
- Trained Personnel
- Opportunities for Inclusion
- Consideration of Alternative Schedules
III. Protections Afforded
- Behavioral Criteria for Integration
- Intervention Plan Focusing on Criteria
- Schedule for Reviewing Progress

Progress to Date

The need to provide a program in a setting other than the regular classroom is based on the assumption that placement in such a setting is not in the best interests of a given student. But how do we document that such is the case? It would seem that several factors must be documented in order to establish this conclusion.

Appropriate Program

A second area of inquiry that staffing teams must pursue establishes the "specialness" of the program being proposed for the individual student. This area of inquiry specifically establishes the elements of the proposed program which are required by the student in order to constitute an appropriate program.

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Protection Afforded

A final set of questions to be asked by the staffing team deal with assuring that there is a system for preventing specialized settings from becoming permanent placements for given students.

LRE Applied as a Quality Standard

This presentation will also include references to what might be described as "quality" issues in LRE as related to students with behavioral deficiencies.

Issues of Generalization

Generalization is defined by Holvik and Benskin (1988) as follows:

> Generalization is said to have taken place when behavior learned in one situation occurs in another situation. It is basic to the performance of all adaptive human behavior because, if our behavior didn't generalize, we would be limited to the point where we would have to learn entirely new sets of behaviors every time we found ourselves in a somewhat different situation (Fischer & Gochros, 1975). (p. 257)

The importance of this concept is at the core of each decision we make to remove a student from the regular classroom setting to receive specialized services. In these situations we must balance the need for specialized interventions outside of the regular classroom with the realization that anytime we aim at behavioral change using such a strategy that we must also systematically address the generalization question. Put simply the question is, "How are we going to systematically plan for the transfer of skills learned under the specialized training setting to the setting in which we hope to have the behavior demonstrated?" If we fail to address these questions we engage in what Stokes and Baer (1977) described as the tendency to "train-and-hope."

While recent writings such as that of Morgan and Jenson (1988) provide us with the various strategies necessary to plan for generalization we need to keep in mind that if our interventions can be delivered in the setting in which we expect more appropriate behaviors to be performed that our generalization challenges are greatly diminished. Such a realization seems to add a quality dimension to LRE considerations.

Curriculum Issues in Specialized Environments

In 1990 an important publication titled <u>At the Schoolhouse Door</u> appeared documenting the results of a series of visits to nominated exemplary programs across the country serving students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Two findings from this study deserve mention here. First, the authors found

numerous examples of what they referred to as a "curriculum bleakness" in many of these specialized settings. As described by Steinberg (1991):

> At its best, learning is a passionate involvement with an idea, a desire to grapple and to know. At its most mundane, it's the acquisition of skills to accomplish the tasks at hand. What we saw sometimes approached the acquisition of skills, but hardly ever engaged the hearts and minds of teachers and students. (p. 7)

A second element observed in these visits was on overreliance on what the authors' referred to as the "curriculum of control." Steinberg (1991) describes how such an approach leads to an over reliance on maintaining control rather than helping children gain control. She states:

> While control is a central issue for all schools, and indeed every teacher needs to feel confident about managing the class, in the classrooms that we observed it seemed too often forgotten that classroom order is a <u>means</u> to an educationally sound environment and <u>not an end</u> in itself. (p. 9)

While it would be unfair to characterize all specialized services for such students as being dominated by these two themes, it is reasonable to remember these two characteristics as a tendency in isolated programs that serve such students. When making a decision that a student needs services beyond the regular classroom decision makers and program implementors would be wise to look at specialized settings in relation to the richness of the overall curriculum offerings in such settings and the extent to which control dominates the overall program.

Increasing Skills of All Educators

One of the unfortunate consequences of our eagerness to provide special services for students in special education has been the potential lack of emphasis on the skill level needed by all educators to deal appropriately with student diversity. A listing of these skills might include:

- Use of positive reinforcement and management without coercion.
- Social skills instructional strategies.
- Behaviors for building relationships with and among students.
- Principles to individualization.

While these skills may be within the repertoire of most educators, we may have de-emphasized the behavioral teaching aspects of the regular classroom in favor of more specialized settings. A focus on LRE applied to the regular classroom environment would appear to have the advantage of fostering interventions to be

used by the regular classroom teacher that can help many children. It should also be remembered that recent special education judicial decisions have established the expectation that many supplemental aides and services can be delivered in the regular classroom and that training opportunities must be provided to regular educators so as to increase their skills in programming for students with disabilities.

More Specialized Services

In addition to these elements that would appear appropriate for all children, there is also a need to focus on those particular interventions that seem most needed for students who are identified as behaviorally disordered or seriously emotionally disturbed. One model of looking at such elements is The Iowa Program Standards for Interventions in Behavioral Disorders (Sodac, McGinnis, Smith, Wood, Dykstra & Brees, 1988). According to these authors:

> Regardless of the type of program model in which a student with emotional and behavioral disorders is served, it is imperative that a specialized program dealing with his/her behavioral difficulties be provided. While we may flinch at the idea of mandated uniformity, it does seem reasonable that our field has reached a point where we can assure our consumers (students and parents) that certain professionally generated quality elements will be provided to them. (p. 5)

The Iowa model goes on to define the program components that should be a part of any students program as methods for increasing desirable behavior, decreasing inappropriate behaviors, skill training in social skills, affective or emotional growth strategies and/or self control strategies, academic or functional skills development and generalization, maintenance and reintegration.

Research on Decision Making

In addition to these issues this presentation will also include the results of a recent study in a Midwest state examining the factors leading staffing teams to place students with emotional and behavioral disorders in more restrictive settings. Subjects were randomly selected from self-contained programs in public school settings and special school settings. Data collection strategies included a systematic site review and interviews with professionals who participated in the placement decision. Results and implications will be discussed.

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Champagne, J. F. (1993). Decisions in sequence: How to make placements in the least restrictive environment. Edlaw Briefing Paper, II, 9-10, 2-16.

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Organization of Data

1. Demographics
2. Special Education History
3. IEP Characteristics
4. Procedural Components
5. Prior Interventions
6. LRE Specific Procedures
7. Behavioral Characteristics
8. Rationale for Intensive Service Environments (Interviews with Staffing Team Members)

1. Demographics

- Significantly higher mean IQ for high school students in special schools*
- Much higher representation of males than females in both regular and special schools
- Racial over-representation of African Americans, particularly elementary students in special schools*

**Statistically significant*

2. Special Education History

First Special Education Label

- About half initially identified initially as BD
- Substantial numbers initially identified as LD, MD, Speech/Language

History by Student Age

- First special education label about 7-8 years of age
- Students in special schools older at time of ≈3.5 BD weighting*

Problem Models

- A substantial range of program models had been tried prior to present placement

Age of Students in Current Programs

- Mean age of students in special schools was older*

**Statistically significant*

3. IEP Characteristics

Behavioral vs. Academic Goals

- Behavioral goals present in almost all cases (both at time of present placement and currently)
- Academic problems were addressed more in regular than in special schools*

Supplementary Services

- ☞ Difficult to discern differences across groups with the exception of site therapeutic services and school counseling being more available in special schools
- ☞ A large proportion of students in regular and special schools were not receiving supplementary services

**Statistically significant*

4. Procedural Components

Evidence of Disagreement

- Very little disagreement regarding decisions documented

Persons Present at Decision Making Meeting

- Considerably less involvement by school psychologists and social workers in special school placements
- Limited representation from resident school districts for students placed in special schools
- Very limited student attendance at placement meetings

Behavior Affecting Academic Progress

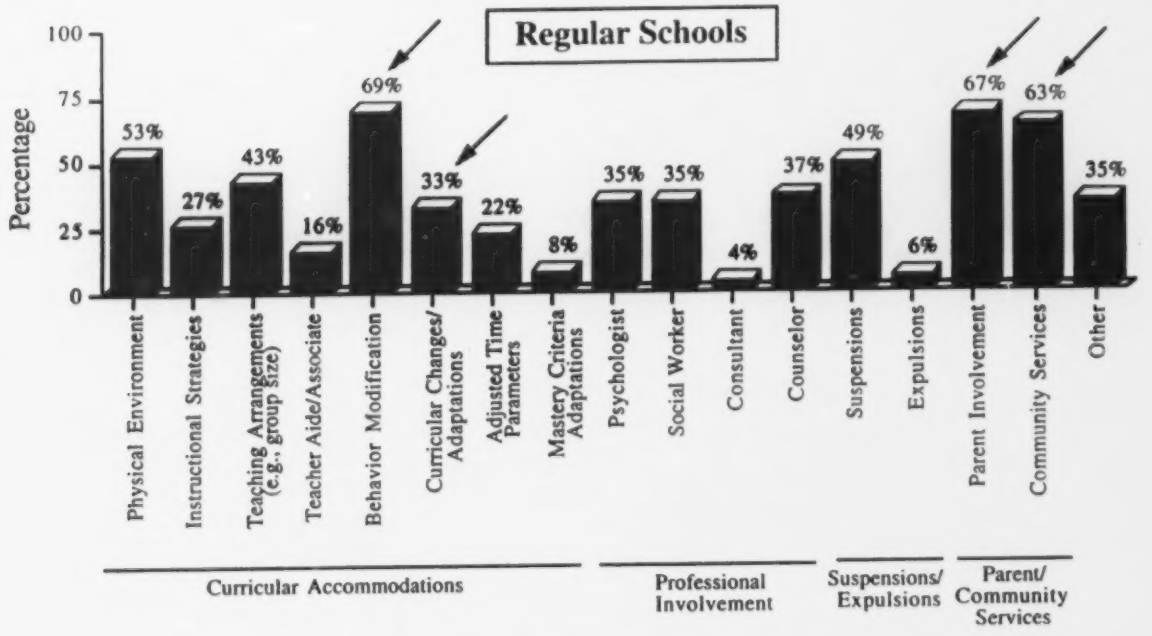
- High percentage of reports for students in regular and special schools indicate that behavior problems were affecting academic progress

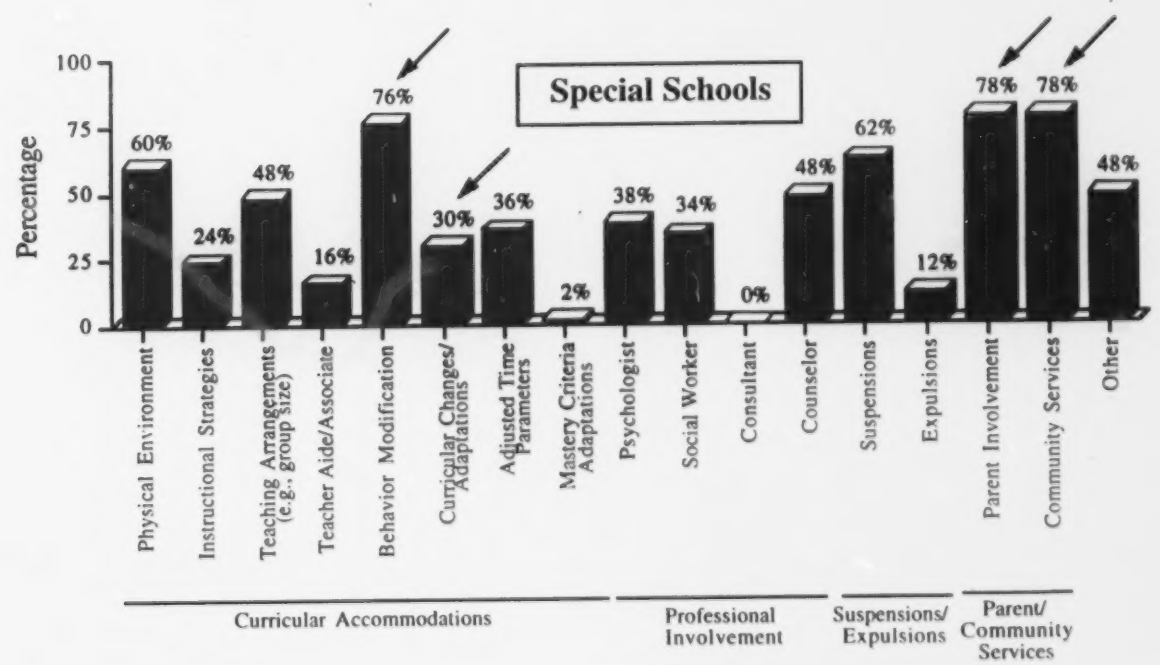
5. Prior Interventions

- Parents of students served in special schools were more involved than were parents of students served in regular schools

☞ Relatively limited use of interventions involving instructional strategies or curriculum changes/ adaptations.

Intervention(s) Tried Prior to Present Placement



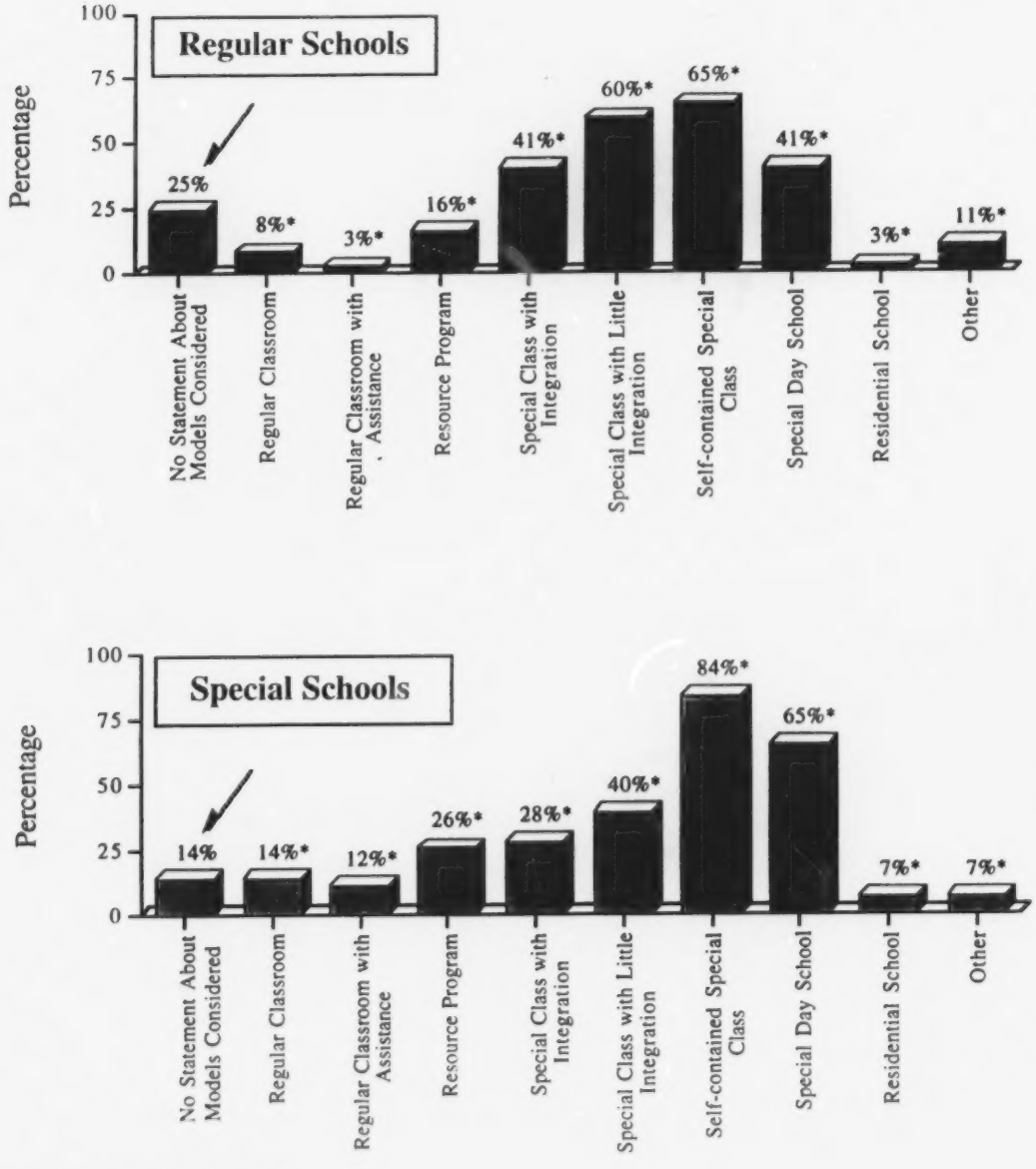


6. LRE Specific Procedures

Program Options Considered

- ☞ Thoughtful comparison of options is more important than merely checking off options
- ☞ Is "rebuttal presumption" for regular classroom rejection being met?

Program Models Considered Before Deciding on Present Placement



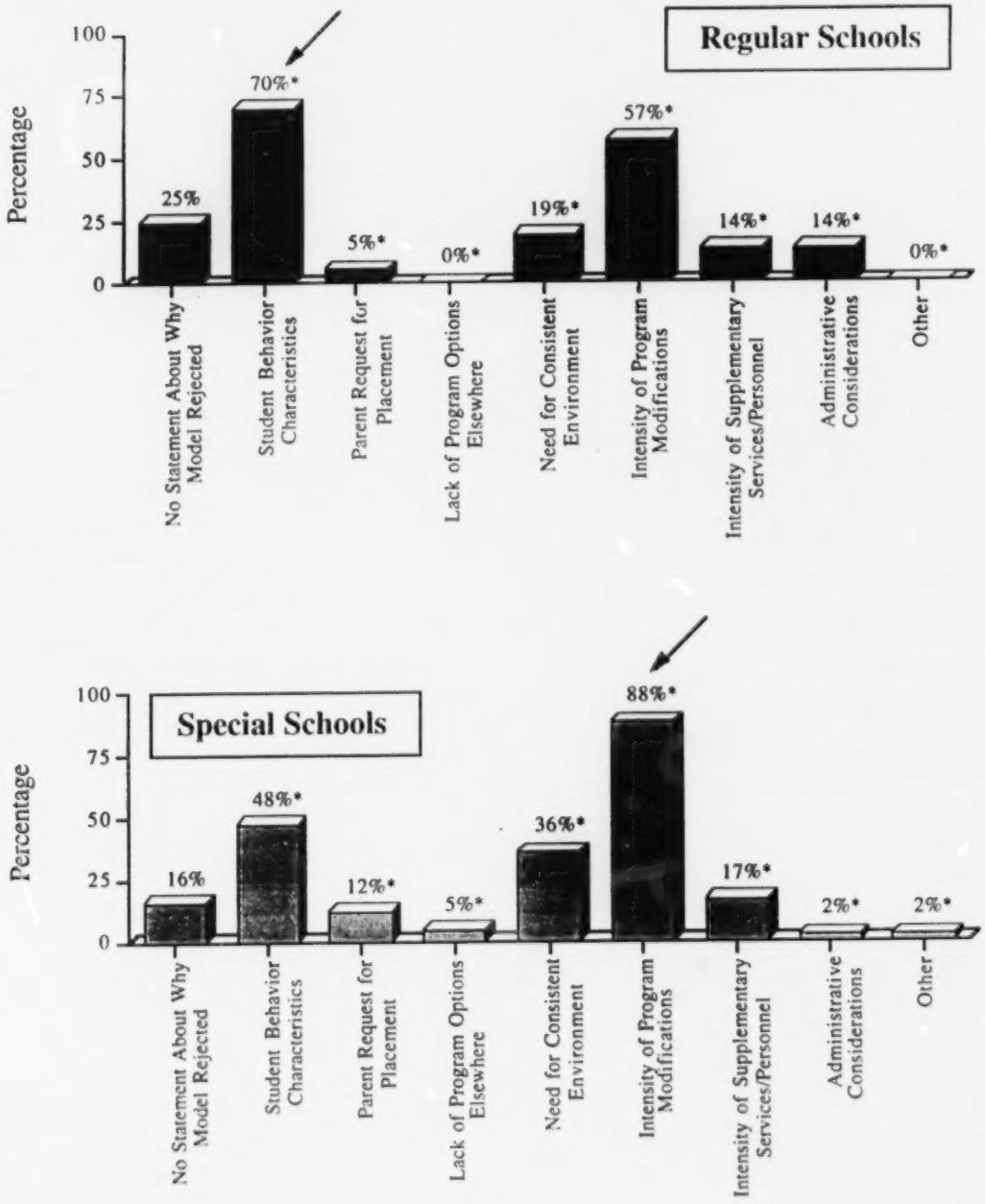
* Percentages based on cases where statement was found.

6. LRE Specific Procedures (con't.)

Why Less Restrictive Options Were Rejected

- ☞ A statement should be provided in all cases
- ☞ Lack of program options and administrative considerations were *infrequently* cited
- Attribution of problem *to student* in regular schools; attribution to *intensity of program modifications* in special schools
- Parents more frequently requested placement in special than in regular schools

Reason(s) Why Less Restrictive Program Model Rejected



* Percentages based on cases where statement was found.

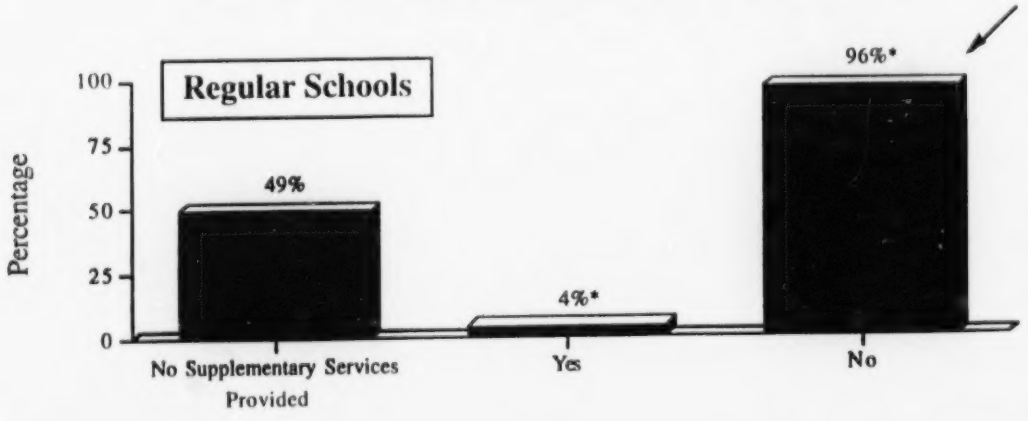
6. LRE Specific Procedures (con't.)

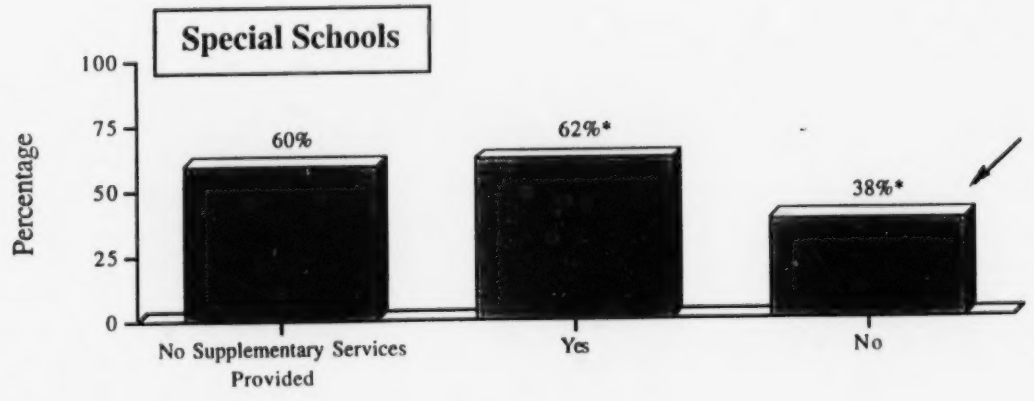
Why Supplementary Services Can't Be Provided in LRE

- Supplementary services were used relatively infrequently

☞ Supplementary services statement was almost entirely missing for students in regular schools; not true for students in special schools

Does Current IEP Indicate Why Supplementary Services Can't Be Provided in Less Restrictive Environment?





* Percentages based on cases where supplementary services were provided.

6. LRE Specific Procedures (con't.)

Could Student Have Been Served in LRE with Additional Resources?

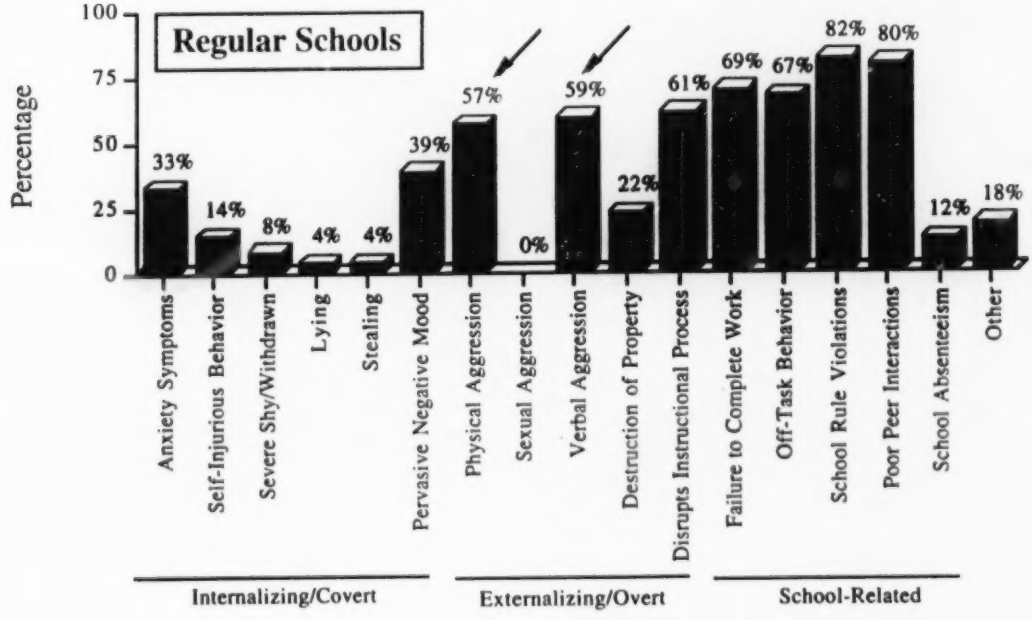
- ☞ During interviews, 50% of staffing team members reported that students attending special schools could have been accommodated in regular schools with additional resources

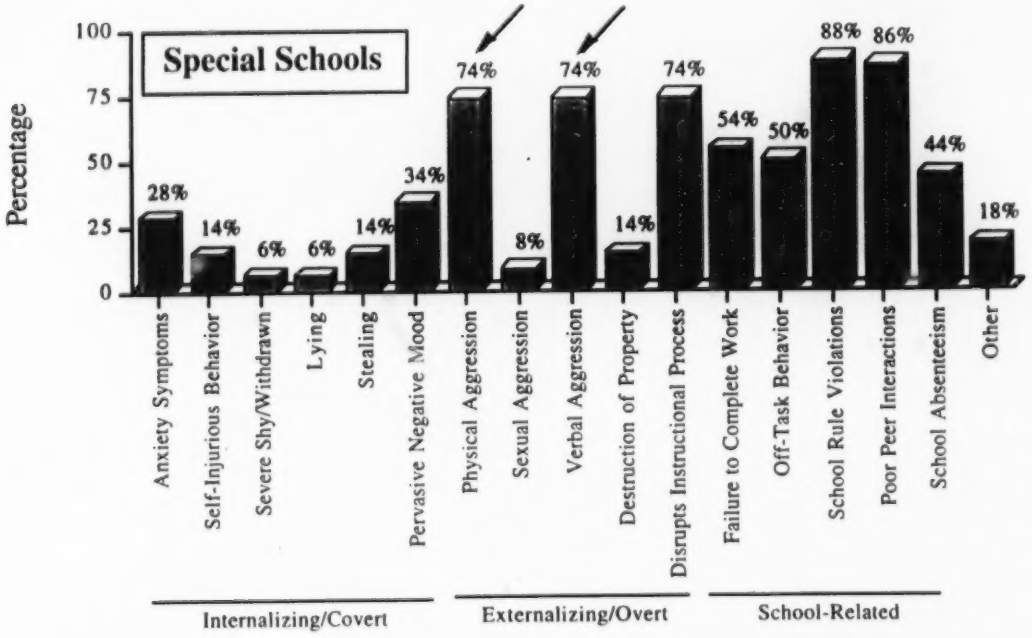
7. Behavioral Characteristics

Behavior Problems Exhibited at Time of Present Placement

- Higher rates of physical and verbal aggression for students in special schools

Behavior Problems Exhibited at Time of Present Placement



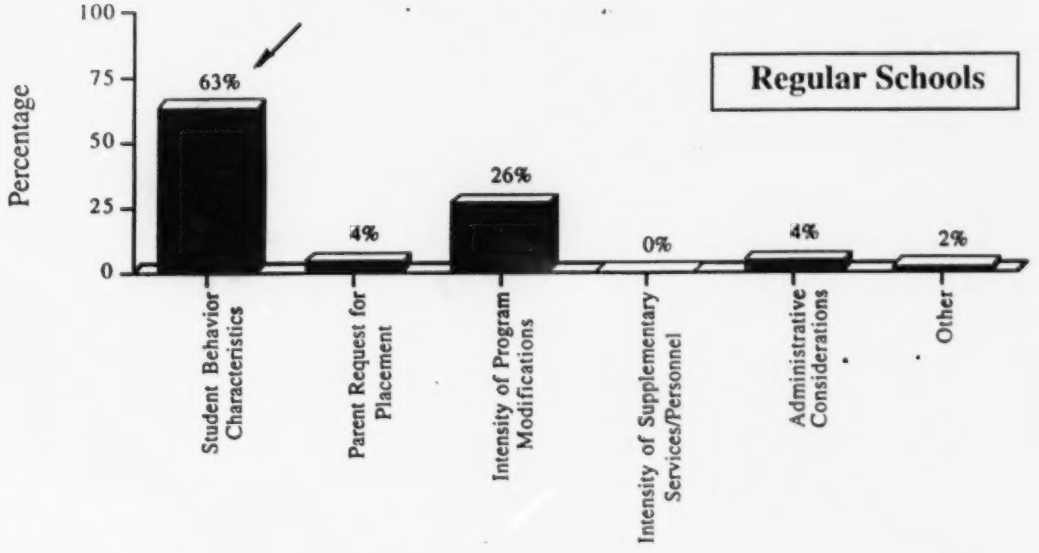


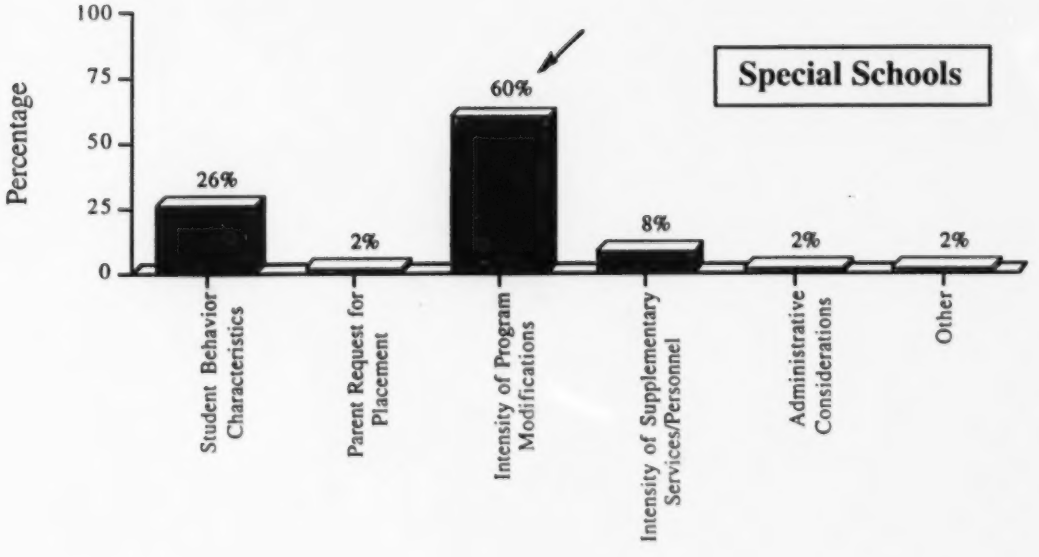
7. Behavioral Characteristics (con't.)

Summary Impressions of Investigator

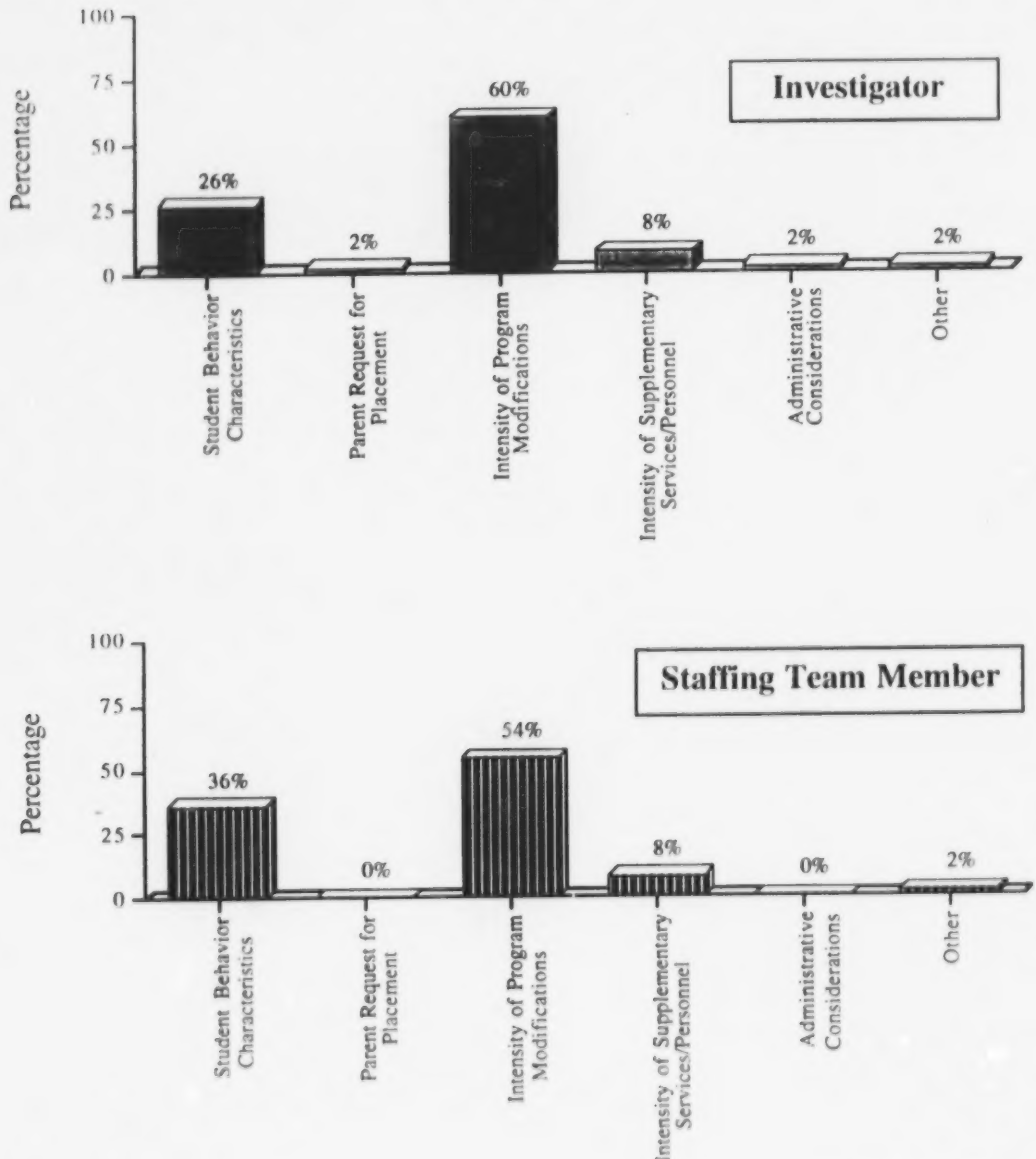
- Impressions concerning students in regular schools focused on student behavior characteristics, impressions concerning students in special schools focused on intensity of program modifications needed.

Summary Impression of Investigator Concerning Primary Reason for Placement in Present Setting





Comparison of Summary Impressions of Investigator vs. Staffing Team Member Concerning Primary Reason for Placement in Present Setting (Special Schools Only)



8. Rationale for Intensive Service Environments

"What did the special school offer to deal with the student's behavior problems which were not available in the regular school setting?"

- Small classes/school/individual attention
- More staff with special training, including aides
- Psychological therapies
- Supervised/structured environment
- Therapy/involvement with family
- More flexible school day
- Fewer distractions

☞ Question: *Why can't these be offered in regular schools?*

8. Rationale for Intensive Service Environments (con't.)

"Do you feel there remains a need for a special school setting in the continuum of programs/services for students with behavioral disorders?"

49 out of 50 interviewed said "Yes".....

- Definitely need option
- Too disruptive in regular school
- Smaller/classes/school/individualized instruction
- Respond more quickly to problems
- More staff with special training

☞ Comment: *Strong support for special school option.*

8. Rationale for Intensive Service Environments (con't.)

"In your opinion, what are the significant differences in the behavior of students who can be served in a special class in a regular school setting and those needing to be served in a special school setting?"

- Intensity/severity of behavior problem (almost 50%)
- Pose threat/danger to others (about 25%)

Observations Concerning Data from AEAs Without Special Schools

Demographics

- Fewer females
- Smaller proportion of minority students
- Mean current grade somewhat lower

Special Education History

- None with MD as first special education label

IEP Characteristics

- Smaller proportion receiving *no* supplementary services
- Greater use of teacher aides/associates

Procedural Components

- Special Education Consultant less often present at placement staffing

Prior Interventions

- Adjusted Time Parameter more frequently used
- Psychologist more frequently used

Observations Concerning Data from AEAs Without Special Schools

LRE Specific Procedures

- SCI-L model more frequently considered before deciding on present placement

Behavioral Characteristics

- Proportion exhibiting physical and/or verbal aggression more similar to students in special than in regular schools

Rationale for Intensive Service Environments
(AEAs Without Special Schools)

"If there were special school(s) in your AEA, do you feel the staffing team would have given serious consideration to placing this student in such a program?"

- "No" - 33%
- "Yes" - 67%

Rationale for Intensive Service Environments
(AEAs Without Special Schools)

"Do you feel there is a need for a special school in your AEA in the continuum of services for students with behavioral disorders?"

- "No" - 13%
- "Yes" - 87%

Rationale for Intensive Service Environments

(AEAs Without Special Schools)

"In your opinion, what is(are) the significant difference(s) in the behavior of students who can be served in a regular school setting and those needing to be served in a special school setting?"

- Intensity/severity of behavior problem (33%)
- Disrupts the learning of others (27%)
- Aggression (20%)
- Poses threat or danger to others (13%)